Hawaii plugs into digital age

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A 12-year plan to overhaul old systems and mindsets aims to transform state functions

By Vicki Viotti

If Sanjeev "Sonny" Bhagowalia gets his way, the concept of state government "paper pushers" will be a thing of the past.

The fact that paper systems of record-keeping, permitting and myriad other tasks of public services remains so much a part of the present in Hawaii is somewhat startling to the state's first chief information officer.

Bhagowalia is a veteran of federal information technology (IT) projects and has taken stock of where many other states are in their quest to get a handle on their data. His mission, which is now moving from planning to the 12-year implementation stage, is to drag Hawaii IT into the 21st century.

It didn't take long for the new CIO to grasp the local situation: Hawaii is at the bottom of the barrel. Besides the paper files, there are old computers still in use — one system is 36 years old — being kept in order with parts sometimes findable only on eBay.

"Anyone keeping a computer alive for 36 years, they gotta be given a 'MacGyver' award," he said with a laugh, referring to the old TV series about the infinitely resourceful secret agent. "So I think people are very smart here, in terms of what they can do. Just imagine if you really give them technology, they could really make things happen."

But, Bhagowalia underscored: All is not lost. The advantage of bringing up the rear among the states is that you can learn from the mistakes made by everyone in the front.

The status quo will be completely overhauled, he said. Now, 220 kinds of government work — "business functions," as he calls them — are largely services for which people have wait in line. He wants them online, not in line.

"What we're trying to do is make them available digitally, so that you can deal with your government online," he said. "We think less than 5 percent of our services are online right now.

"We want to leapfrog Hawaii to be in the front, to get to a digital government, mobile government — information anywhere, just the right information you're authorized to see," Bhagowalia added.

"We want to make it completely agnostic, meaning you can interact with it from an Android device, with an Apple device or Dell or whatever. We want to use the Web, mobile technologies and open data, so you can interact with this on any platform."

Kickstarted with a $3 million startup grant from the Omidyar Ohana Fund, Bhagowalia's Office of Information Management and Technology got under way. For the long haul, the agency secured $25.3 million in the last supplemental budget.

Sanjeev "Sonny" Bhagowalia
State chief information officer

In October, OIMT released its Business and IT/IRM (Information Resource Management) Transformation Plan. The goal of the agency is to promote open access to information across state government, so it's starting with this document. It's available from its website (oimt.hawaii.gov).

The entire plan, which comprises 20 distinct projects, is 1,432 pages long, but the average taxpayer needn't despair at consuming all that. A 10-page executive summary is there, too.

Some of the projects sound rather geeky and bureaucratic. But Bhagowalia said the idea is to spend less time and

money on all the duplicative business going on — various state agencies having their own email systems, for example — and more on developing mobile apps and other real-world ways of delivering state services.

He described, as a for-instance, an app that could help direct people preparing for a disaster to shelters, detailing which have capacity, which can accommodate pets or any number of details.

Here's a thumbnail sketch of a few of the transformational projects as described in the plan:

» A large chunk, $15 million, has been set aside for Enterprise Resource Planning projects, which have the goal of overhauling and coordinating internal but critical functions that are especially inefficient and scattered. These include payroll — currently a largely manual and paper-dominated process — as well time and attendance, finance management, acquisition management, grants management, asset inventory management and human resources.

» Data Loss Prevention is a security control that is designed to detect potential data breach incidents in a timely manner and prevent them by monitoring data while in motion in network traffic.

» The Website Dashboard project will create a "user-friendly, citizen-centric" design for state websites. The Office of Information Management and Technology site provides an example of the evolving format for the various state department sites.

» The Hawaii Broadband Initiative has been a flagship project since the start of Gov. Neil Abercrombie's administration. It involves the upgrading of the state's wired and wireless broadband networks and has numerous components. One is a federally funded project run by the University of Hawaii and the state Department of Education to install fiber-optic cable to every school, community college and library in the state by 2013.

» The Tax Analytics Project will have a contractor to analyze tax data with the ultimate goal of identifying unpaid taxes that may be collectable.

» One aim of the Health IT Project is to connect health-related state agencies for secure information exchange. This will enable, for example, state health data sharing with health care providers and the Hawaii Health Connector, the health insurance exchange created as part of federal health care reform.

There are many critical needs, Bhagowalia said, not the least of which is the lack of a disaster recovery plan for state databases.

That issue was brought to the fore in a very public way with the recent crash of the Department of Motor Vehicles system, which is administered statewide by the City and County of Honolulu. Luckily, he said, the city anticipated the potential of the problem and had a backup system that restored services, a result that most state agencies could not hope to achieve.

In general, "you cannot have a data center below sea level, one mile from the water, and have no disaster recovery," he said.

Coming up with a way to have the various agency computer mainframes work together and back up each other's data in the event of a disaster is one of the jobs Keone Kali, deputy CIO of operations, is confronting.

But although Kali's job is primarily concerned with the systems and hardware, he's also working on a human problem: getting the state's unionized shops engaged in the whole transformation process.

He's taken the opportunities presented by incidents such as the DMV shutdown or the tsunami preparations to work closely with teams that manage the existing systems.
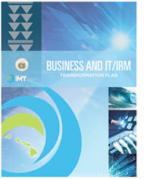
That level of human networking will be essential to the integration of people with the hardware, he said.

"You just keep building that trust, little by little, and work through the departments in terms

of their staff issues with IT," he said.

"All transformation is difficult," Bhagowalia added. "There is no question that this is the right strategy, in terms of what industry and government have done before and been successful. But at the end of the day, someone's got to want to do it."